

Legitimacy in the Making: Communication Work in Purpose-Driven Infrastructure Projects

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1) Research Problem and Aim

Infrastructure projects are increasingly understood as inherently political arenas where competing stakeholder interests and divergent institutional logics shape project trajectories (Çıdık et al., 2024; Clegg & Biygautane, 2025). These political dynamics intensify in purpose-driven infrastructure projects, where broader social and environmental issues such as sustainability, equity and public value are central. Project managers must build acceptance across stakeholders with fundamentally different definitions of what constitutes project success. Hence, in such settings, project legitimacy, defined as the perceived appropriateness and acceptability of projects within contested environments, emerges as a critical challenge requiring continuous negotiation rather than one-time establishment (van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019; Hetemi et al., 2021).

This paper presents findings from a larger study examining how project managers in purpose-driven infrastructure engage in ongoing sensemaking and negotiation between professional convictions about what projects should achieve and multiple other expectations they must accommodate. The study identified three interconnected moments: grounding judgement (how context, experience, values and norms shape interpretation), navigating (strategic choices under constraint), and communicating (stakeholder engagement through communication work). This paper focuses on the ‘Communicating’ moment, examining how project legitimacy emerges through this communication work.

While project legitimacy scholarship establishes that project managers play pivotal roles in shaping how projects are perceived and judged (Gil, 2010; Derakhshan et al., 2019; Baba & Brunet, 2024), empirical understanding of the communication work through which project legitimacy emerges remains limited. We know legitimacy is shaped through discourse and communication (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Vaara et al., 2024), but we lack insight into how project managers actually engage in this communication work in their everyday practices.

This gap is particularly acute in purpose-driven infrastructure, where project managers must communicate across competing value systems, rendering legitimacy especially contested and precarious.

This research examines how project legitimacy emerges through project managers' communication work in purpose-driven infrastructure. We ask: What communication work do project managers engage in within contested purpose-driven infrastructure, and how does this work shape their experience of their professional role? By revealing the communication strategies, ethical tensions and identity struggles embedded in this work, we explain communication not as neutral information exchange but as politically charged labour central to project delivery.

2) Brief Research Methodology

This paper draws upon data collected for a larger study that identified three interconnected moments in project managers' legitimacy building in purpose-driven infrastructure projects. The larger study established the main contours of each moment, providing an overarching framework. This paper focuses exclusively on the 'Communicating' moment, presenting an early and deeper analysis than previously reported, and in that sense, it reflects work still in development.

The larger study employed a qualitative, interpretive approach using semi-structured interviews with project managers working on purpose-driven infrastructure projects in Kenya and the United Kingdom. These contexts, underpinned by significantly different historical, legal and cultural backgrounds, were selected for the larger study to reveal a diverse range of approaches by project managers. Despite these contextual differences, both locations were selected for their explicit integration of sustainability, equity and public value goals into infrastructure delivery, creating conditions where project legitimacy is actively contested and project managers must engage in intensive communication work across diverse stakeholder groups.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews covering project managers' experiences throughout project lifecycles. This paper draws upon the material relating to communication work derived from practice-focused questions such as: How did you explain difficult trade-offs? When have you felt uncomfortable with your framing? How do you decide what evidence to present? Therefore, the data captures project managers' actual practices, their reasoning, and their evolving understandings of communication's political and moral dimensions.

Analysis of the communication-relevant material followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, moving iteratively between data and theory to identify patterns in project managers' communication work and sensemaking. Analysis attended to the 'what' (evidence, relations), 'how' (strategies, rhetorical moves), and 'why' (justifications, ethical judgements). While sensitised by discourse theories of legitimation (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Vaara et al., 2024), analysis remained grounded in practitioners' own categories.

3) Key Findings

Our findings unpack project legitimisation as everyday communication imbued with societal and organisational politics as well as the politics of self. We identify five dimensions:

Strategic Framing Across Institutional Logics: Project managers (PMs) continuously adapt how they frame project purposes across diverse audiences, such as government funders, technical experts, communities and sustainability advocates, drawing on multiple communication repertoires. This involves authorisation (regulations, expert recommendations), moral evaluation (fairness, sustainability), rationalisation (efficiency, cost-effectiveness), and narrative framing (intelligible stories). While essential for coalition-building, managers experience ethical ambiguity, for example, questioning when adaptation becomes manipulation. Thus, strategic framing brings about ongoing ethical judgements about these boundaries.

Evidence and Quantification as Strategic Resource: PMs deliberately choose when to deploy quantified evidence versus qualitative narratives. Quantification offers apparent objectivity that travels across stakeholder groups, yet managers critically recognise its limitations as obscuring nuances, marginalising unquantifiable values or masking uncertainty. Caught between institutional pressures for numbers and their own professional scepticism, managers question what constitutes good-enough justification under ambiguity.

Relational Engagement and Epistemological Justice: Sustained dialogue and relationship-building prove essential but resource-intensive. PMs learn to approach engagement with epistemological justice, recognising local knowledge and diverse perspectives as legitimate expertise. Yet institutional constraints often limit meaningful participation, forcing managers to decide whose voices count while justifying these choices to themselves and others.

Transparency as Moral Labour: PMs commit to transparency but face constant constraints such as commercial confidentiality, political sensitivities and incomplete information. This creates moral labour around maintaining integrity while systems may discourage full disclosure. PMs develop workarounds while questioning whether they maintain professional integrity or become complicit in privileging powerful actors' access.

Communication as Constitutive Work: PMs recognise communication actively shapes what projects are in stakeholders' understandings. Early framing creates path dependencies, making communication morally weighty as managers cannot escape responsibility for narratives they construct, values they emphasise or marginalise, and voices they amplify or silence. This reshapes professional identities as many entered the profession as neutral coordinators but confronted communication's political power, recognising themselves as political actors with material consequences.

4) Implications

This research advances project legitimacy scholarship by revealing the communication work through which project legitimacy emerges. We demonstrate that this work entails communication strategies alongside ethical tensions and identity struggles, challenging instrumental views of communication as neutral stakeholder management. Importantly, we reveal how PMs navigate dual pressures of project legitimacy (external acceptance) and professional integrity (internal moral questioning). It shows how authorisation, rationalisation and narrative framing are not neutral tactics but involve ethical judgements under constraint. This bridges critical project studies' call for attention on power and politics (Clegg & Biygautane, 2025; Pinto et al., 2025) with practice-based perspectives on how work actually gets done (Brunet, 2019).

For practice, findings reinforce that PMs must be prepared as political actors (Pinto et al., 2025; Coleman & Bourne, 2018), requiring spaces to reflect on ethical dilemmas and develop moral frameworks for value conflicts (Müller & Turner, 2010; Winch & Hajikazemi, 2025). Organisations must resource this work by providing time for relationship-building, flexibility for iteration and institutional support for ethical dilemmas. Current governance frameworks (Ika et al., 2024) treat communication administratively. Instead, governance should build reflexive spaces for assessing practices and surfacing tensions. Leaders must navigate value pluralism requiring practical wisdom (phronesis) in ethically complex situations (van Marrewijk et al., 2016; Winch & Hajikazemi, 2025).

Future research should examine how communication practices vary across contexts, career trajectories' influence, and identity evolution through repeated challenges. A particularly interesting avenue for future research would be asking whose voices are privileged or marginalised, and with what equity consequences?

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